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ABSTRACT

The mass media and especially television pose problems for teachers in humanities disciplines traditionally associated with leisure, time for reflection, and the quiet contemplation of the good, true, and beautiful. Although other media have been criticized for their deleterious effects, television most affects humanists in their mission because of its pervasiveness. We humanists must understand television as an educational force and somehow come to terms with it. An article in the August, 1984 Atlantic Monthly by David Marc, entitled "Understanding Television," argues that, although television is the most effective purveyor, image, and narrative in American culture, it has failed to become a subject of lively humanistic discourse. Television poses dangers to thought and informed decision-making that humanists must be prepared to address. Much television programming is mere spectacle and can be negatively employed to manipulate, form attitudes, and incite to action. While television has tremendous educational potential, instructional broadcasters sometimes place too much emphasis on entertainment values in their desire to appeal to viewers other than those looking for direct instruction; too much delight can get in the way of the business at hand. Television programming tends to be superficial, not questioning the meaning of life or human experiences. Individuals who daily spend hours passively viewing television are in danger of "remaining what they are," rather than living life to the fullest. Four references are listed. (LMM)

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Television and the Humanist

(An address given at the banquet of the 1984 Community College Humanities Association, Central Division, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Kalamazoo, MI, October 5, 1984)

I have no lofty theme to develop tonight. I want only to pass on a few thoughts, for whatever they are worth, about the problems the mass media -- television in particular -- pose for teachers of disciplines associated traditionally with leisure, time for reflection, the quiet contemplation of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

You may wonder what qualifications I possess to take on this subject and play the philosopher. The answer is, none worthy of note, except that I began my teaching career in the years immediately following World War II, when the TV set was just taking over the place of honor in American homes. At least, I can remember what life was like before the tube. We listened to the radio, went to the movies once a week, and, if we could afford it, joined the Book of the Month Club.

You may also wonder why I concentrate on TV rather than on other of the mass media. After all, not too long ago, educators were exercised about the supposed deleterious effects of comic books -- which were inexpensive some years ago -- on the reading habits and views of reality of our students. We also used to fulminate against the tawdry values the Hollywood film makers were holding up to our youth as desirable. Much before that, in the 19th century and earlier, serious-minded moralists deplored the rise of circulating libraries because they were sure they would encourage idle men and women, especially the latter, to waste even more time with frivolous novels.

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All of us like to fret over the effects of the non-electronic mass media. We tell our students that the "fleshy" magazines reduce woman to little more than the status of an object. They may not listen, but we dutifully warn them against the cheap hedonism extolled by Hugh Hefner and his minions. Some of us are still old fashioned enough to prescribe readings of Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina as antidotes.

Yet, of all the mass media now driving our society, television is the one that affects us most in our mission as humanists, if for no other reason than that it is all pervasive. You know the dreary statistics--the thousands of hours of viewing children do before they enter school, the four, five, or even six hours every day your students may spend watching soap operas, situation comedies, cop series.

Recently, I came across a passage in a novel that brought me up short. In a scene in Less Than Angels, written by a brilliant Englishwoman, Barbara Pym, one of the principal characters has come home to visit his family at their country estate. He goes to the morning room to invite an elderly uncle who lives in the house to accompany him and his mother and brother to a flower show in the village. The uncle declines. He does not want to miss a TV program scheduled for later that afternoon. Whereupon the novelist has the young anthropologist reflect as follows:

> He had the impression that his uncle was a kind of prisoner, or a sacrifice laid before the altar of the television set which demanded a constant tribute of victims.

As teachers and humanists, we must feel concern over the intellectual and spiritual estates of our students who are daily "victims" on this altar. Television, despite the mindlessness that characterizes much of its programming, is an educative force, if only in a perverse way.

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Desirable educative forces reflect the ideal of the ancient Greeks. As Werner Jaeger put it in his monumental study of Greek thought, Paideia, "Education means deliberately moulding human character in accordance with an ideal." Television and the people who run it as an enterprise in this country may not be deliberately "moulding," and they probably do not have an ideal of human character as a guiding standard. But commercial broadcasters when they serve the tastes of the lowest common denominator to the exclusion of all else are are inculcating standards of conduct and sets of values, shabby though they are.

Please don't conclude that I am here trying to heap even more scorn on an already much-scorned medium. Far from it. I have spent twenty years of my career trying to harness TV to education and instruction. All I am saying is that we, as humanists, must understand TV as a force in our society and somehow come to terms with it.

In this connection -- that is, understanding and coming to terms -- let me refer you to an article in the August 1984 Atlantic Monthly written by Davic Marc, a professor of literature, and entitled "Understanding Television." I commend it to your attention as humanists, despite its occasional over-cuteness and straining for effect.

Mr. Marc sums up his thesis as follows: the most effective purveyor, image, and narrative in American culture has failed to become a subject of lively humanistic discourse." Too often, he complains, humanists look at TV only to deplore it. He warns us that "unfortunately, it is literature that is in danger of becoming a precious antique."

He points to effects of television that must alarm us as the guardians of the best that has been thought and said. The items in the indictment are familiar to ycu. Television, for example, "leaves behind a body of dreams that is, to a large extent, the culture we

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live in." TV is a narcotic that envelopes the passive viewers within a haze of dreams -- dreams of wealth, eternal youth, easily available sex, violence as the solution to all human problems. Even when television attempts to present the history of our time, Mr. Marc asserts, it presents it as a vaudeville show, a series of disconnected episodes without any ordering principle or sense of proportion, unless, we remind ourselves, we regard the attempt to entertain and titillate an ordering principle.

In this respect, television is not unlike other mass-produced entertainment and popular culture. Richard Hoggart, a British social philosopher and student of mass communications, tells us that the mass production of art differs from the mass production of consumer products, which has as its objective making products more widely available. Commercial TV networks, however, always in search of ways to please mass tastes, reduce variety in program approaches and attitudes. The form and nature of the programs are predetermined by this catering to mass audiences. This catering, too, is immensely profitable.

Much TV programming, as you know, is mere spectacle. (You remember what rank Aristotel assigns spectacle among the elements of tragedy in his Poetics.) Even news coverage, for which most Americans now rely on television, is often little more than spectacle. Events are not ordered or related. On your evening news report, everything is of equal significance: the burglary of a downtown jewelry story, the bombing of a U. S. embassy abraod. Stimulating the viewer is the end, not informing or apprising of significance.

When this kind of visual stimulation is employed to manipulate, to form attitudes, to incite to action, there can be a real problem. TV cameras can make a dozen professional protesters outside the White House appear

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a groundswell of grass roots protest. In retrospect, we know how television coverage affected the American public's attitude toward what proved to be a misadventure in Viet Nam. Have you ever speculated as what the people of this country might have felt about World War II if TV cameras had been on the Normandy beaches on D-Day?

Manipulation, everyone will agree, is something we must help our students guard against, whether it be to make them "better" consumers of the wares advertised or uncritical adopters of political and social points of view. After all, just as the unexamined life is not worth leading, the unexamined opinion is not worth holding.

All this is say that, from the humanist's standpoint, TV tends to remain on the surface. TV cameras are far from being X-ray machines. (By the way, we are not concerned here with television as a medium for transmitting public events, drama, opera, music to millions of people simultaneously, in which case it can be magnificent.) Television's "imaginative" fare, unfortunately, is often more manner -- sophisticated though it is -- than substance. How often do you see any questioning of the meaning of life or human experience? You will note, too, if ever you watch credits roll at the end of a program, that most dramatic series are written by teams of writers--which precludes any authorial wringing out of meaning. As Richard Hoggart notes, writers and producers "have to invent a world which most of us, in the times that we are consumers, are happy to inhabit." It's a world, as he says that wears "a fixed grin."

Once again, let me hasten to add that I am aware of the tremendous educational potential of television, both in delivering produced-for-television direct instruction to special audiences and in transmitting cultural programming to broad audiences. I must admit that I have misgivings as to the over-emphasis that instructional broadcasters

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sometimes place on entertainment values in their desire to appeal to viewers other than those looking for direct instruction. Instruction should be mixed with delight. Too much delight, however, can get in the way of the business at hand.

No matter what reservations he or she may have about formal instructional programming prepared for TV presentation, the heart of every humanist must leap up at the thought of more people watching a performance of Hamlet or The Tempest on a single evening than ever watched the plays in theaters in the entire history of Shakespearian production. We know, too, that television performances of operas, concerts, ballets do not keep people away from the real thing. After an American Ballet Theater telecast on PBS, orders for tickets increase at the box office. Last season's presentation by PBS of Thomas Mann's Buddenbrooks led to stacks of paperback editions of the novel appearing in the bookstores. Publishers report that Brideshead Revisited on Masterpiece Theatre resulted in the sale of a half million paperback copies of Waugh's novel.

There is really no solid evidence that television has substantially hurt reading or the publishing business, even though you are sure that it is further shortening the already short attention span of both children and adults. The Winter 1983 issue of Daedalus was devoted to reading. About half the articles have to do with the effects on reading habits of the electronic media. All agree that reading and print are not about to disappear. Some magazines have bitten the dust since the advent of television --Life, Look, The Saturday Evening Post, Colliers. But new magazines that appeal to special interests have sprung up to fill the void.

Each year sees about 40, 000 trade books published in this country. A study of "the reading public" commissioned in 1978 by the Book Industry Study Group found that in six months of 1978, 30% of the total U. S. population had read from one to nine books, and 25% had read

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ten or more. Half the readers, by the way, borrowed their books from the public library, which suggests that whatever financial distress publishers are experiencing is the fault of spiraling book costs as much as the result of television watching. The same survey found, by the way, that "on the average, book readers spend as much time watching television as do nonbook readers."

How should we interpret all this? First, much of what is published and read nowadays falls under the classification of the "subliterate" -- the popular Harlequin Romances, for example. Second, there are still flourishing among us many "confirmed readers . . . whose reading habits were formed" in the days before TV, as a Daedalus writer reminds us.

Another contributor adds an ominous note, however:

> Most people decide whom they will vote for, what they believe about atomic weapons control or unemployment, how they perceive the issues of the Middle East, what they conceive China to be like, how they envision the history of man, much more from what they observe on television than from what they read.

Television, in short, like other mass media, is both a force for the good and for the not-so-good. Everyone in our society feels the frenetic pressure of the media and the media's need to create "events." One of the contributors to the Daedalus issue on reading reminds us that if our Constitution were to be written today, its authors could not do so. It was composed in secrecy by a small group. Nowadays, TV broadcasters and pushy reporters would revel in exposing such a group as a cabal of eveil old men scheming to impose their wills on the gullible citizenry.

Certainly, television poses dangers to thought and informed decision-making that we, as humanists, must be prepared to reckon with. TV is a subtle manipulator, especially of the young and impressionable. Marshall McLuhan told us in The Gutenberg Galaxy that we are "confronting an electronic technology which would seem to render individualism

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obsolete and corporate interdependence mandatory." At times, it even looks as if the people who determine the shape of television in this country are dedicated to producing the kind of citizen W. H. Auden celebrated ironically in "The Unknown Citizen," a man who

> . . . was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan/
> and had everything necessary to the Modern Man.

The final couplet asks the questions the humanist asks, and gives the advertising man's reply:

> Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd.
> Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

As I suggested earlier, there is also danger in the strings of "Events" the TV producers create, events which put an exciting image on reality but distort it for the unwary viewer. Another bit of verse suggests what happens. The poet is another Englishman, the contemporary D. J. Enright. The poem ("Event") begins:

> Here is a picture of the helicopter
> From which the pictures are being taken.
> This is a shot of another helicopter
> From which the shot of the helicopter
> From which the pictures were taken
> Is taken.

This mirroring mirrored images of reality is worth contemplating.

In closing, I feel compelled to leave you with some message. Perhaps, it is nothing more than to urge you to understand one of the forces shaping the way John and Jane Doe view the world and reality.

About fifty years ago, the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset wrote a little text that has become a modern classic, The Revolt of the Masses. In the book Ortega defined what he considered a significant phenomenon of this centry, the mass man, "one whose life lacks any purpose and simply goes drifting along. In the book, he also divides men up into two classes of people: "those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties, and those who demand

nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every moment what they are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection."

Those who spend four or five hours of every day glued to a television set, "drifting along," in Ortega's phrase, are in danger of remaining what they are. Our task as humanists is to try to make them see and agree that those who live life to the fullest "pile up difficulties and tasks for themselves."

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